

Aberystwyth University

Welsh-Breton Town Twinning

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Welsh-Breton Town Twinning

Opportunities and challenges for the future

Many Welsh towns are twinned with towns in Brittany. Twinning is part of civil society, providing opportunities for international friendship and cultural exchange. Welsh-Breton connections especially celebrate shared Celtic heritage. But, with challenges from budget holidays to Brexit, **will town twinning stay relevant, or be relegated to the past?**



Twin towns in Wales © OpenStreetMap Contributors

WISERD researchers **Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins** and **Rhys Dafydd Jones** became interested in town twinning after their research on German migration to Wales found that Germans had often first visited Wales on exchange. They wanted to learn more about the importance of European cultural exchange to Wales – so they looked across the sea to Brittany.

Celtic connections have been important in the resurgence of Welsh language and identity. Welsh capital Cardiff twinned with Nantes, historically a Breton centre, in 1964. More Welsh-Breton town twinning launched in the 1970s, with new connections growing over the following decades. There are now **over 40 towns in Wales with a Breton twin**. These are shown on the map at left.

What is town twinning?

Town twinning – ‘jumelage’ in French – largely began after WWII to help rebuild good relations among national neighbours. Now, twinning is common across Europe, from cities to villages. Twinning is more than an official agreement or commemorative sign. Twinning associations allow residents to get involved. Events and activities include: socialising, school exchanges, sports, music and dance, holidays and tours, language learning, and formal delegations.

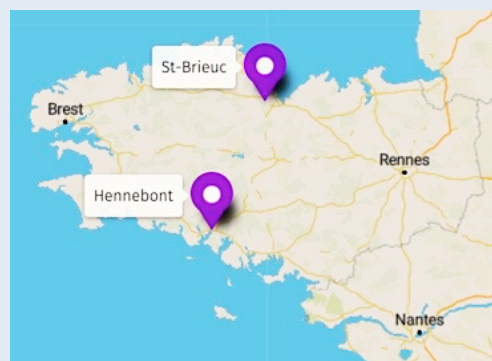


Fête des Associations Hennebont 2019 © Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins

A visit to Brittany

To learn more about Welsh-Breton twinning today, Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins visited two Breton towns in September 2019: **Hennebont** (Henbont) and **St-Brieuc** (Sant-Brieg).

Hennebont, in South Brittany, is a town of around 15,000 people, and has been twinned with **Mumbles** (Mwmbwls) near Swansea since 2004. St-Brieuc, in the Côtes-d'Armor near the English Channel, has been twinned with **Aberystwyth** in Ceredigion since 1973.



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St-Cado's Island, near Hennebont © Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins

Hennebont is around 15km from Lorient, one of the largest fishing ports in France and famed for the annual Festival Interceltique. The region has historic Welsh connections. The 6th century Welsh saint Cado, or Cadog, crossed the channel and is believed to have lived on an island in the Etel river, where a chapel commemorates him. More recently, Breton timber was traded for Welsh coal, which was brought up river to fuel Hennebont's industry.

Hennebont is also twinned with Kronach in Germany, Mourdiah in Mali, and Halhul in Palestine. The four twinning associations were all on display at the Fêtes des Associations, which Bryonny attended. This annual event helps local residents discover clubs and activities to join.

Bryonny visited Hennebont's tower museum and Basilica, and learnt more about local maritime heritage at the historic Port-Louis Citadel and soon-to-be-restored Etel 'Glaciere', or ice factory.

Twinning in Hennebont

- Hennebont's four town twinning associations share a dedicated meeting room in a community building. This is a space to get together, and to keep mementoes from exchange visits.
- Hennebont association members especially enjoy socialising together. The social life of town twinning is a drawcard for new members, often including people who have moved to Hennebont and want to get involved locally.
- Association membership fees and funding from the council help to subsidise activities, including an annual exchange visit with Mumbles.



The Hennebont visit in newspaper Ouest France

Twinning in St-Brieuc

- St-Brieuc's twinning association focusses on facilitating exchanges between other local groups in both towns. A range of educational, sporting and cultural exchanges have taken place - there has even been an exchange of firefighters!
- An exchange between Breton and Welsh traditional dance groups has run successfully for many years, and includes public performances.
- More recently, St-Brieuc's association has provided opportunities for people with learning disabilities to travel and experience Wales.



St-Brieuc's 'Aberystwyth Roundabout' © Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins

St-Brieuc is named for a Welsh saint – St Brioc, or Briog. He travelled from Ceredigion in the 5th century, and is known as one of the seven founding saints of Brittany. The town today is best known for its distinctive scallops – the coquilles St-Jacques.

St-Brieuc is also twinned with Alsdorf in Germany and Aghia Paraskevi, near Athens in Greece. Bryonny joined a delegation from Aberystwyth Town Council for the opening of a twinning display at St-Brieuc's annual fair. Representatives from twinning associations in nearby towns also attended along with visitors from Germany. (In 2020 St-Brieuc will host a major conference for French-German town twinning.)

Bryonny saw some spots where town twinning is commemorated in in St-Brieuc – including the Aberystwyth roundabout! She visited the harbour and viewed the bay, learning about past stories and present challenges.



St-Brieuc – Aberystwyth twinning memories

Why get involved in town twinning?

Like other forms of civil society, people have their own reasons for taking part in town twinning. Motivations also differ between Wales and Brittany. But several reasons are shared:

- To meet new people – at home and abroad.
- To learn or practice language skills.
- To explore an interest in another country.
- For cross-cultural understanding.
- To travel with an organised tour group (often at a reduced cost) and have ready-made local contacts.
- To share memories from previous travel and maintain connections with friends abroad.
- Because their children took part in a school exchange.



Dance exchange dinner, St-Brieuc © Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins

What are the challenges?

Town twinning has now run for decades and offers many positive opportunities – but challenges for the future are already apparent.

- **Language** can be a practical barrier. Although twinning aims to foster friendships despite differences, goodwill cannot always overcome communication challenges.
- In Wales, **language** poses a problem for **participation**. European language learning is declining in Welsh schools. Fewer students means less demand for school exchanges – and more language barriers in the future.
- Twinning associations themselves struggle to attract **younger members**. Younger people do participate in school, sports and music exchanges, but do not carry on their involvement by joining the twinning association. Greying associations in turn look less appealing to younger people.
- Enthusiastic '**champions**' lead associations, organise events and maintain links. But champions are growing older and struggling to find **successors** who are willing or able to put in a large amount of voluntary work.
- Tight public budgets, especially in rural areas, mean that town councils are less able to **financially support** twinning. With few resources available for public events or promotion, and combined with the challenges above, twinning risks being reduced to relationships in name only.

Town twinning has a lot of heart. But, twinning began before budget airlines offered easy holiday access to almost anywhere in Europe. Visiting a twin town is no longer a unique opportunity – and going back regularly may look boring beside long travel 'bucket lists'.

In recent years, the phenomenon of 'un-twinning' has emerged. Towns 'un-twin' when there is no longer the interest, will or ability to continue the connection. Sometimes, this is due to dwindling association membership, or the end of active programmes like school exchanges. Across the UK, safeguarding concerns and declining language enrolments have particularly affected school exchanges.

Politics have also intervened. There are suggestions that Euroscepticism has negatively affected some twinning relationships. More prosaically, twinning has been an easy target for council cost savings. At worst, exchange visits have been seen as 'just a junket'.

There are many challenges for twinning to overcome, and survival will mean change. But some things must stay the same: the values of friendship and exchange.

We are grateful to Mumbles and Aberystwyth twinning associations for their assistance, and to association members in Hennebont and St-Brieuc for their time and kind hospitality.



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